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Asthma is one of the leading causes of school absence due to illness. Approximately 9.2 million children younger than 18 years of age have been diagnosed with asthma in their lifetime. School staff members can play an important role in helping students with asthma manage their disease at school.

Asthma is a chronic lung disease that affects the airways. Children with asthma have airways that are inflamed. Inflamed airways are very sensitive, so they tend to react strongly to things called “triggers.” Triggers are either allergy-causing substances, such as dust mites, mold and pollen: or irritants, such as cigarette smoke and fumes from paint and cleaning fluid. Changes in weather conditions (hot, cold, or breezy) and poor air quality often aggravate asthma. When the airways react to a trigger, they become narrower due to swelling and squeezing of the airways by the small muscles around them. This results in less air getting through to the lungs and less air getting out. At times children may need to use their inhaler or take a breathing treatment after P.E. or playing on the playground. Symptoms of asthma include **acute** episodes of:

* Coughing
* Wheezing (a whistling or squeaky sound during breathing)
* Chest tightness
* Shortness of breath

Symptoms can vary in severity; they can be mild or moderate, or they can be severe and life threatening. Asthma can be controlled with proper medical diagnosis and management. It cannot be cured.

Uncontrolled asthma can result in reduced performance for the child with asthma and disruptions for the entire classroom. Students with asthma can function to their maximum potential if their needs are met. The benefits to students include better attendance, improved alertness and physical stamina, fewer symptoms, and fewer restrictions on participation in physical activities and special events.

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* Don’t delay medical attention
* Report if student’s symptoms are interfering with learning or activities with peers.
* Alert school administrators, school nurse, and parent(s) or guardian(s) of changes in a student’s performance or behavior that might reflect trouble with asthma.
* Encourage the student with asthma to participate fully in physical activities…Plan activities to allow for variations in stamina or tolerance for exercise.
* Plan field trips and other activities in a way that ensures students with asthma can fully participate.
* Advise the school nurse when you suspect poorly controlled asthma in a student, so that the nurse can discuss the situation with his or her parent(s) or guardian(s) and suggest a referral to their physician.
* Reduce allergens and irritants in the classroom. Common allergens and irritants that can make asthma worse in classrooms include strong odors (paints, perfumes, cleaners, deodorizers, and markers) and dust.
* Check with your school nurse when planning activities away from school to see which children may need an inhaler.

For more information on asthma go to [www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov) or contact me at ext. 117

Kim Holmes, RN